Many Westerners, and many Muslims, consider ‘Liberal Islam’ to be a contradiction in terms. This is not the case. The term ‘liberal’ has negative connotations in much of the Islamic world due to a prevailing sense of the hypocrisy of an introduction to the region by colonialists and imperialists who flouted the liberalism they touted. Yet the Islamic world is witnessing a thriving movement of Muslim thinkers who address ‘liberal’ concerns such as democracy, the separation of Church and State, the rights of women, the rights of minorities, freedom of thought, and economic progress – hardly the only concerns that might be labeled ‘liberal’, but bedrock themes in the liberal tradition.

While liberal Islam shares parallel concerns with Western liberalism, it is no mere echo of the West. Both traditions may support freedom of thought, for example, but they do so in different discourses. As I have tried to demonstrate in my recent anthology, Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), the Islamic discourse has generated three tropes, or meta-narratives, through which liberal concerns are expressed.

The ‘Liberal Sharī‘a’

The ‘liberal sharī‘a’ trope argues that the revelations and interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad – the body of Islamic guidance and precedence handed down from 7th-century Arabia – command us to follow liberal principles. For example, in the case of freedom of thought, some ‘liberal sharī‘a’ arguments take verses from the Qur’an that urge the believers to think independently. ‘All Sharī‘al (Iran, 1933-77), for example, draws on the Qur’anic distinction between bashar (the human animal) and insan (the fully human being): ‘Humankind is a chooser, that is, the only being who is not only capable of revoltting against nature and the order which is ruling over it, but can revolt against its own natural, physical, and psychological needs. Humans can choose things which have neither been imposed on them by nature, nor is their body fit to choose them. This is the most sublime aspect of humanity.’ Similarly, Abolhassan Bani Sadr (Iran, 1942-88) argues that the Qur’an states: ‘God is not forgetful’ – means only that the application of the general injunctions of the sharī‘a to the multifarious details of human life, and the confrontation of new problems according to the dictates of maslahah (public good) have been left to the discretion of the body of conscious Muslims.’

Within this general argument, definitions of the public good may vary. Narasihal Madjid (Indonesia, born 1938) states that the public good is in the ‘minds and recognised values of the community’. Kenneth C. Davis (USA, born 1924) argues that ‘the public good is undetermined and it is in the particular conscience of each person, has no fixed form in which it can be finally replaced by the concept of public good’.

The ‘Silent Sharī‘a’

A second trope of liberal Islam I call the ‘silent sharī‘a’. In this trope, freedom, for example, is not required by the sharī‘a, but it is desired by the sharī‘a. This trope deals with the idea that the sharī‘a is silent on certain topics – not because the divine revelation was incomplete or faulty, but because the revelation intentionally left certain issues for humans to choose. Sayd Vahiduddin (India, born 1909) and others have written: ‘There is no one interpretation of a text, but there are many interpretations given the difference in understanding between different interpreters. An interpretation of a text is essentially pluralistic. It may be a vehicle for human interests and even passions. The conflict of interpretation is essentially a socio-political conflict, not a theoretical one. Theory is indeed only an epistemological cover-up. Each interpretation expresses the socio-political commitment of the interpreter.’

The ‘Interpreted Sharī‘a’

The ‘interpreted sharī‘a’ trope holds that the sharī‘a requires liberty, and the second trope holds that the sharī‘a allows liberty. But there is a third liberal Islamic tropes that take issue with each of the first two. This I call the ‘interpreted sharī‘a’. According to this view, ‘Religion is divine, but its interpretation is thorugh human and this worldly’. I quote here from ‘Abdul-Karim Sourosh (Iran, born 1945): ‘The text does not stand alone. It does not carry its own meaning on its shoulders, it needs to be situated in a context, it is theory-laden. Its interpretation is in flux, and presuppositions are as actively at work here as elsewhere in the Western Univeral. Understanding religion is not an exception. Therefore their interpretation is subject to expansion and contraction accordong to the assumptions and the questions inquiring them.’ We look at rev- elation in the interpretation of much, as a devout scientist looks at creation in the mirror of nature. In fact, religion is silent on certain topics Ð not because the divine revelation was incomplete or faulty, but because the revelation intentionally left certain issues for humans to choose. I quote here from Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Egypt-Qatar, born 1926) who hold different views or approaches are inevitably desists from intellectual movement, some ‘liberal sharī‘a’ members take verses from the Qur’an that urge Muslims to think independently. Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Egypt-Qatar, born 1926) argues that all Muslims who ‘want to do nothing wrong, are [later] found to be right. Furthermore, in the confrontation of ideas and thoughts, even error can be of considerable benefit, because it will induce truth to express itself and grow as a strong force. Perhaps it was not entirely small talk when our Prophet said that differences of opinion among his umma (community) were a mercy [from God]! Laith Kubba (Iraq-England, born 1954) states: ‘Sharia is public good in terms of economic progress: ‘As Muslims seek new sources of income, new forms of growth in a competitive world and redefine their priorities, their outlook will shift from the religious concept and values of Islam to the reality of the Muslim world. They will contin-ue to turn to Islam as a source of personal and communal identity and moral guidance, but he who holds the views of one or another person, or the views of his times or approaches has absolute freedom of speech in all religions’.

In both of these examples, the sharī‘a allows Muslims freedom of thought in order to attain public goods.

The ‘Interpreted Sharī‘a’ trope – constitute an impossible ‘anomaly’ (p. 244). One wonders whether libe- ralism based on Christian scripture would be considered similarly anomalous. Samuel Hunt- ington’s The Clash of Civilizations makes no dis- tinction between liberal and non-liberal Mus- lims – they are all in the ‘other’ camp. Similarly, a cartoon in the New Yorker magazine in early 1998 showed a caricature of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami saying, ‘We are interested- ed in a cultural exchange. We will give you one of our writers, and you will give us Salman Rushdie’ – this despite Khatami’s support for rule of law in Iran and his opposition to the groups seeking Rushdie’s execution.

Liberal Islam thus faces hostility on two fronts, both of which treat it as a contradiction in terms: Muslims who consider it not properly Islamic and Westerners who consider it not properly liberal. Liberal Islam is caught in the crossfire, as the party of war on both sides joins in tacit collusion against those seeking to build bridges in between.

Is this not the same dilemma in which the field of Islamic Studies finds itself? ▶

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